9-30-2005

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Piquetero Strikers Clash With Police

by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Argentina
Published: 2005-09-30

Argentina's government has taken a tougher stance with "hard-line" jobless strikers, with President Nestor Kirchner ordering large police deployments to prevent protests from blocking transit routes in Buenos Aires. Interior Minister Anibal Fernandez, in charge of federal security services, has repeatedly announced that the government would not tolerate surprise blockades by "piqueteros duros," or hard-line piqueteros, as the strikers are called. The piqueteros are calling for expanded pension coverage.

Multiple standoffs between police, piqueteros

In August and September, President Kirchner ordered police to prevent the closure of key transit routes around the capital like the Avenida Pueyrredon. Among the groups conducting roadblocks were the Unidad Piquetera, the Corriente Clasista Combativa (CCC), the Bloque Piquetero, the Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados (MTD) Anibal Veron, and the Movimiento Independiente de Jubilados y Desocupados (MIJD), led by prominent activist Raul Castells. The Polo Obrero, Cuba-MTR, Movimiento Quebracho y el Territorial Liberacion (MTL), the Movimiento Sin Trabajo (MST) Teresa Vive, and the Bloque Obrero y Popular (BOP) are other elements of the radical wing that has at times allied itself with the Kirchner government but now finds itself starkly at odds with the Partido Justicialista-peronista (PJ) president.

Piqueteros were using surprise blockades to foil police efforts to confine their strikes and managed to disrupt a number of roads in August. Decentralized demonstrations have become a preferred tactic for urban protestors internationally when they seek to cause civic disruptions of daily business.

In June, demonstrators occupied ticket booths in the Constitucion train station in Buenos Aires, securing a promise from the private concessionaire running that railway line to reinstate nine employees who were laid off and to create 52 new jobs. "Our goal is not to interrupt transit or make problems for the passengers of trains but to pressure the companies to create jobs, by hurting them economically," said piquetero activist Nora Seitz of the BOP. In that case they applied pressure by occupying the ticket booths, a form of protest that let passengers ride the trains for free, gaining the protesters support that they were not seeing with roadblocks. But the breakdown of discussions between piqueteros and the federal government saw the return of roadblocks later on.

Press reports said that large deployments of police managed to stymie a number of demonstrator efforts to block Puente Pueyrredon and to enter the historic Plaza de Mayo in late August and early September. Kirchner ordered that the police not carry firearms, and Fernandez supervised the deployments. Both demonstrators and the government have had their eyes on the Oct. 23 elections, where Argentines will choose municipal and federal legislative leaders.
A severe split in Kirchner's PJ pits his supporters against the more right-leaning wing of the PJ led by ex-President Eduardo Duhalde (2001-2003). Kirchner partisans have accused Duhalde's faction of funding and encouraging piquetero blockades, a charge the Duhaldistas furiously deny. Former first lady and current senatorial candidate Hilda "Chiche" Duhalde said on Aug. 30, "It pains me very much that they would say that, because I am absolutely an enemy" of such protestors.

Anibal Fernandez said his ministry would be "investigating" whether there was a financial nexus between Buenos Aires Peronistas allied with the Duhaldes and piquetero groups. Duhaldista Osvaldo Mercuri, president of the Chamber of Deputies of Buenos Aires province, joined the denials of Chiche and Eduardo Duhalde. "The friends of the piqueteros are the government, which ordered them to take over service stations" during a gasoline boycott Kirchner called earlier this year (see NotiSur, 2005-04-15).

Strikers call for increase of unemployment benefits

The piquetero movement has been a consistent feature of Argentine political life since the collapse of the national economy in 2001 (see NotiSur, 2001-08-10, 2004-03-12, 2004-07-16). But, with the loss of middle-class protestors who similarly took to the streets demanding political changes after facing economic ruin that year, the piquetero movement has become a more isolated sector of the left. As long as Argentina's brisk economic growth rate continues (see NotiSur, 2005-09-23), the piqueteros are unlikely to regain mass support for some time to come.

In Argentina, 47.8% of the population of 37 million is poor and 14.4% is unemployed, according to official statistics. However, the unemployment rate reaches nearly 20% if those who receive a small monthly stipend (the equivalent of US$50) that, since 2002, the government has provided to unemployed heads of households are counted among the jobless. With the economic development since 2002, the jobless rate has been on a slow decline from the 25% rate it reached that year, but there is still a large population who will mobilize in the streets on behalf of the piquetero leadership.

Key piquetero demands at this point include an increase of the jobless monthly stipend from 150 pesos to 350 (from about US$50 to US$120), the universalization of social-benefits packages like the unemployment stipend, and the release of imprisoned piquetero leaders, who the protestors call "political prisoners." Universalization would triple the rolls of social beneficiaries.

Raul Castells released from prison after hunger strike

The detention of Raul Castells was a focal point for protestors prior to his release on Aug. 11. He had been detained for "attempted extortion" when he led a December protest outside the doors of a McDonald's fast-food restaurant. Courts ordered his detention in June, and the leader commenced a hunger strike that lasted two months. Upon his release, Castells said he had lost 20.7 kg, but "every year 17,000 children die of hunger in this country. My condition is much better than the 55 children who already died or are going to die today." Castells has been jailed several times for leading blockades of various businesses.